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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

17 April 1961

Draft for Board Consideration

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Implications of a Direct Telephone Link between  
the Kremlin and the White House

1. The establishment of a direct telephonic link between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev is one proposal advanced as a means to avert accidental war, by providing a way to dispel critical uncertainties rapidly and authoritatively. Such a communications link would, however, involve broader political issues and have significant political implications. It is, therefore, necessary to consider such a measure both in terms of its feasibility and effectiveness for its intended purpose, and in terms of these political implications.

2. A direct communications link, could under some circumstances, provide a means for clarifying a situation in which warning indications raised ambiguous possibilities of an enemy attack. It would of course not be sufficient

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simply to ask if a Soviet attack were underway, since Khrushchev's word would be no assurance. But in order to avoid the risks in believing any Soviet reply, the President could tell Khrushchev of the suspicions which had been raised, and inform him that we were therefore going to take the necessary precautions, including getting SAC bombers airborne. This might induce Khrushchev to call off an attack if indeed one were underway and could still be recalled, or if no attack had been planned he would probably be inclined to put a defensive interpretation on US alert measures which the USSR subsequently noted, while he could of course proceed to alert his own forces. In short, a top-level communication could under some circumstances be used to substitute alert for the potential temptation of pre-emptive military action, in cases of ambiguous warning indications.

3. A second way in which a top-level link could reduce the chances of war by accident would be by providing the opportunity for quick notification of the other side in the unlikely case that a missile or "mad" bomber ever escaped control and headed toward the opponents' territory. There might be time, in such a case, to relay this information to the other side, which would probably accept the explanation on the grounds

- 2 -

SECRET

SECRET

that leading off with a single weapon, and giving warning, was an improbable attack strategy. In this case, as in the case of notification of one's own alert, the other side would thus be given the preferable option of alert rather than pre-emption in panic.

4. There are, however, several limitations and disadvantages to such a measure. A major limitation would be time. It would not always be possible for one leader to reach the other instantaneously; in particular, we doubt that Khrushchev's communications with the Kremlin when he is away match those between the US President and the White House. More important, in the missile age it would often be the case that one leader could not instantly explain any actions of his side which had alarmed the other, but only give generalized assurances of peaceful intentions. These assurances, however, would be exactly what the other would expect if he thought his opponent were launching a surprise attack. In fact, so long as surprise attack remained a lively concern on either side, telephonic reassurance would probably be heavily discounted.

5. Another limitation, disadvantage, and even danger in such a link, would be its effect on political maneuver,

- 3 -

SECRET

SECRET

especially in times of tension. In seeking clarifications of warning indicators to avoid war, there would be a common interest. But in times of crisis one or both sides frequently keep their ultimate intentions deliberately ambiguous as a means of inducing the opponent not to press his risks to the limit. There is, in short, a premium on bluffing, and neither side is likely to give up this option, or be persuaded that the other has given it up, so long as the present level of mistrust continues. A handy direct link might lead one side, in a time of tension, to demand clarifications which the other would not wish to make. Thus, in times of high political tension the link in many cases would not serve its intended purpose; indeed, it might be a source of greater, rather than lessened, misunderstanding and risk.

6. Perhaps even more important than its intended purpose, a communications link would have considerable political significance. It would, after all, mark a dramatic and unprecedented step. Khrushchev would probably favor the idea, especially for its contribution to the prestige of his country and of himself. He also would see uses to which he could put the measure. He might, procedurally, try to use the idea as a lever to press disarmament talks. If such a link were established, he would

- 4 -

SECRET

probably be tempted to try to use it for summit-like conversations, and this disadvantage could probably be mitigated only in part by making clear from the outset the specific limited function of the arrangement so far as the US is concerned. He might use it as an instrument of pressure by calling every time that an RB-47 flew near the USSR or a large-scale SAC bomber exercise occurred, in order to get the US to restrict its activities.

7. Political reverberations from the establishment of such a link would stir both the Communist and Western alliances. Intelligence on the Sino-Soviet dispute during 1959 and 1960 makes very clear that Chinese suspicions of Soviet detente and high-level direct relations with the US were a major cause of discord. The Chinese Communists would probably be highly suspicious of a direct Moscow-Washington tie (it is doubtful if one of this sort exists even between Khrushchev and Mao), and frictions in Sino-Soviet relations would be exacerbated.

8. In the West, some of our allies -- especially Adenauer and DeGaulle -- would probably be ill-disposed toward the idea. In their view, it might seem to threaten increasing bilateral US-USSR decision-making on matters which they deem to be subject

to NATO alliance decision. De Gaulle, like the Chinese, might also be concerned over the dramatic implicit reaffirmation of the unique great power status of the US and the USSR. Significant adverse Western reactions could probably be avoided if there were prior consultations in NATO. Since the actual purpose of the communications link would be circumscribed, it should be possible to justify the link as a military emergency standby arrangement set up in accord with the US defense policy of secure control, as well as secure physical invulnerability, of nuclear retaliatory power. Some allies would probably even favor the idea.